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Latin America Review

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Argentina's Neighbors: Reacting to Alfonsin's Election

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Quick-starting President Raul Alfonsin's promises to promote democracy and human rights in South America have heartened many civilian politicians but have heightened concerns among leaders of the authoritarian military regimes in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay. The strength of Alfonsin's electoral mandate, together with his swift moves against the armed forces and the unions, have impressed neighboring politicians who are looking to him for financial aid, moral support, and safehaven.

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Leaders of the military regimes, on the other hand, are wary. They are concerned about a demonstration effect in their own countries, appear more determined to control civilian transitions, and have taken steps to try to limit Alfonsin's impact. At least initially, however, he seems to be backing away from openly supporting any dissidents. By thus tempering his campaign pledges, he probably hopes to avoid jeopardizing what he believes are more important policy objectives. Nevertheless, over time he may be driven by domestic concerns into more open support for opposition groups in neighboring countries.

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Early Contacts With Opposition Groups

Alfonsin's strong antimilitary sentiments and his support for human rights and democratic government have made him a natural ally of like-minded politicians throughout South America, especially in neighboring Uruguay and Paraguay. During the presidential campaign last year, for example, Alfonsin met several times with Uruguayan opposition groups in an effort to bolster their movement. He also has strong personal ties to the large Paraguayan exile community in Buenos Aires, which, provided his campaign with money and volunteers. Furthermore, the Argentine President appointed as mayor of Buenos Aires a staunch defender of Paraguay's most important political opposition group.

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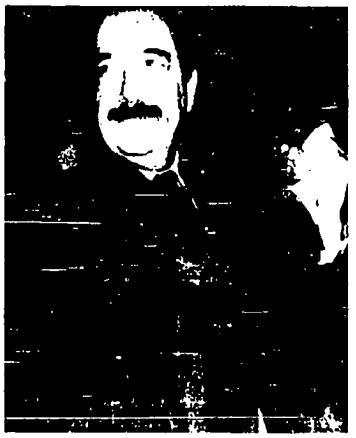

Argentine President Alfonsin Somos ©

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Alfonsin's contacts with Chilean and Brazilian groups generally postdate his election on 30 October. the new President met with Chilean Christian Democrats in late November. He is said to have told them he supported their cause and would keep relations with the Pinochet regime correct but cool. Alfonsin also assured them he would try to increase international pressure on the Chilean military to speed up the transition to civilian rule. his contacts with Brazilian politicians began in mid-November when he met briefly with a small delegation of left-of-center congressmen and academics.

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Civilian politicians from all four neighbors—including outspoken regime opponents—received personal invitations to his inauguration in December.

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Alfonsin's well-publicized contact with these various opposition groups probably was instrumental in the decision of the four regional chiefs of state to forgo the ceremonies. 3.5(c)

Civilian Reaction to Victory

Prodemocratic groups in the bordering states, elated by Alfonsin's win, saw it as a precursor to the demise of military regimes throughout the region. The US Embassy in Brasilia, for example, reported in early December that many political leaders were hoping that the Argentine experience would provide impetus for direct presidential elections in Brazil next year. Brazilian labor leaders, according to the same report, will watch Alfonsin's efforts to reform the Peronist-dominated labor organizations as a model for their own future efforts. Chilean opposition leaders have told US officials in Santiago that they have linked their own hopes for a political opening to Alfonsin's victory. 3.5(c)

Paraguayan and Uruguayan opposition groups were similarly heartened, and apparently intend to use the friendly environs of Argentina as a base for launching antiregime activities. Soon after the election, Paraguayan exile leaders launched "Operation Return," during which selected politicians have openly gone back to Paraguay to test the political waters. Two Paraguayan labor leaders, however, told the Embassy that they intend to return clandestinely to contact union activists for support in opposing the government. 3.5(c)

Uruguayan opposition leader Wilson Ferreira, has accepted Alfonsin's invitation to operate from Argentina under official protection. he has already held meetings with supporters in Buenos Aires. The head of the Uruguayan Communist Party plans to use Buenos Aires as the center for all antigovernment propaganda activities, which currently are scattered throughout Europe and Latin America. The party's leader claims nearly 5,000 members reside in Argentina. 3.3(b)(1)

Official Diplomatic Reaction

Although regime leaders in neighboring states publicly expressed satisfaction with the completion of the Argentine transition, privately they have demonstrated concern about the impact on domestic politics in their own countries. Two Chilean Army officers, for example, told the US defense attache in Santiago that they believed their civilian opposition—once in office—would imitate their Argentine counterparts in undertaking reprisals against the military. Other Chilean and Uruguayan officers told our attache in Buenos Aires that their governments were very worried about leftist influence in the Alfonsin government—especially in the ministries of labor and foreign affairs—which could spill over into their own countries and complicate bilateral relations. 3.5(c)

As a result of such concerns, all four border states have taken a variety of initiatives to limit the demonstration effect of Alfonsin's election. Diplomatically, they have tried to strengthen ties with Argentina, a move they probably hope will discourage Alfonsin from backing civilian opposition groups. 3.5(c)

The Brazilians have held extensive bilateral meetings, searching for common ground with the new administration, and President Figueiredo plans to visit Buenos Aires in the coming months to further strengthen relations. In addition, however, Brasilia has publicly and privately warned the Argentines to respect political differences and the pace of the Brazilian transition.

The Chileans, Argentina's arch rivals in the Southern Cone, also have held discussions. Moreover, in subsequent negotiations on the Beagle Channel, they offered concessions that will likely lead to a final settlement of the dispute later this year. 3.5(c)

The Paraguayans have expressed hope that the joint venture in constructing the Yacyreta hydroelectric project and a binational bridge link will provide the basis for good diplomatic ties. President Stroessner's representatives also have met with the new governor of an Argentine border province.

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The Uruguayans, in addition to taking steps to shore up bilateral relations, are searching for diplomatic allies to help fend off Alfonsin.

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The Neighbors' Domestic Moves

In the three states currently undergoing some form of political liberalization—Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay—military officers have reaffirmed their determination to retain tight control over the transitions to civilian rule

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In Brazil, a group of high-ranking Army officers has told President Figueiredo that any potential presidential candidate in the election next year would have to foreswear investigations into the military's antisubversive activities of the late 1960s.

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US officials in Santiago report that the potential for harsh treatment of the Argentine commanders has encouraged Chilean officers to set aside differences and rally behind Pinochet's protracted transition timetable. Two Chilean officers told the US defense attache there that the developing Argentine experience has already convinced many in the armed forces that they will have to exercise some measure of political control well into the 1990s to allow memories of antiterrorist activities to fade.

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In Uruguay, several civilian political leaders, stated publicly that events in Argentina seem to have contributed to the recent increase in military support for Alvarez's tough conduct of the transition process.

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Paraguay's Stroessner, who continues to hold a tight rein on political activities, has apparently decided to try placating Alfonsin by slightly loosening his grip, according to US Embassy reports from Asuncion. Following the announcement by Paraguayan exiles of their intention to return, government officials met with them in Argentina to notify them formally of Stroessner's shift in policy. Although they were encouraged to participate in national politics, they were also cautioned that certain limiting conditions remain.

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Alfonsin's Cautious Approach

In the weeks since assuming the presidency, Alfonsin appears to have moderated his strong preelectoral support for neighboring opposition groups. He approached the Brazilians twice in January through Foreign Minister Caputo, presumably to assure them that he understands the institutional differences between the two countries and will intentionally try not to influence Brazil's transition. Other evidence suggests Alfonsin would be willing publicly to clarify his position toward military reform, pointing out how Argentina's case differs from the Brazilian situation.

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Alfonsin's stance is likely aimed at helping him meet important policy objectives that would be threatened by allegations of interference in the internal affairs of his neighbors. for example, that the Beagle Channel negotiations with Chile are entering their final stages, and Alfonsin does not want to jeopardize them by antagonizing Pinochet. the new President believes his plans for promoting Latin American solidarity depend on strong ties with Brasilia.

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Outlook

Civilians and regime officials alike in the border states will continue to monitor developments in Argentina carefully, looking for lessons that can be applied to their own situations. Civilians will watch for indications of how far they can press the military, while the armed forces will be sensitive to Alfonsin's moves to curb their Argentine counterparts. Regime leaders will also follow Buenos Aires's contacts with their civilian opponents, and any effort on Alfonsin's part to interfere in their internal affairs will almost certainly lead to deteriorating bilateral relations.

In addition, the closing of military ranks, at least in Uruguay and Chile, suggests that such moves by Buenos Aires might make regime leaders less flexible in dealing with the demands of their civilians. The Brazilians, for example, have already told the Argentines that contacts only with antigovernment groups would heighten military concerns about Buenos Aires's intentions.

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At least in the near term we expect Alfonsin to continue his current policy of providing dissidents in neighboring countries with low-keyed diplomatic and moral support—but little direct assistance. Political activity in all the Southern Cone has been slowed by the summer holidays, so that Alfonsin will face fewer pleas from opposition politicians between now and March. Meanwhile, his present rhetorical support enhances his own democratic credentials and tends to legitimize prodemocratic elements in bordering states.

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Beyond the near term, however, Alfonsin's own domestic problems might encourage him to back neighboring opposition groups more openly. We expect him to face mounting domestic political and economic pressures beyond midyear, and a strong international image as a defender of human rights and democratic government could strengthen his hand against his own opponents.

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